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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that parents can make significant contributions to the education of their severely emotionally disturbed children if given appropriate guidance by education professionals. To actively engage parents in educational processes, educators need to be skilled in effective communication strategies. Working with parents on one focused issue, such as homework, can maintain a guiding purpose for sustained interaction. As students absorb independent work skills and other positive behaviors, the need for direct parent and teacher involvement may decrease significantly. (21 references) (PB)

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HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE EDUCATION OF SEVERELY EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED STUDENTS

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HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE EDUCATION OF SEVERELY EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED STUDENTS

ABSTRACT

In order to better meet the needs of severely emotionally disturbed students, a collaborative effort between educators and parents is crucial. Research has shown that parents can make significant contributions to the education of their children if given the necessary guidance. To actively engage parents in the educational process, educators need to be skilled in communication strategies that promote positive relationships. Parents must feel comfortable with the interaction if they are to continue in the collaboration. Working with parents to focus on a specific issue, such as homework, can establish a purpose for the interaction. A sharing of skills that encourage the accurate completion of homework can provide the basis for improved student performance and active involvement by the parents. Educators can provide assistance and motivation throughtout the process.

HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE EDUCATION OF SEVERELY EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED STUDENTS

Special educators and parents of severely emotionally disturbed students often find themselves overwhelmed attempting to identify and implement interventions that will have a positive outcome (Ramsey & Walker, 1988). In their desperation, they may blame one another or collectively point their fingers at the "system" for it's failure to provide what they perceive to be necessary to affect more immediate behavioral and academic change (Cone, Delawyer & Wolf, 1985; Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman & Maxwell, 1978). The energy spent in finding fault is wasted and the problems persist. It is only through a joint ownership of the responsibility for bringing about change with severely emotionally disturbed students that the cycle of blame can be broken. Those with a vested interest in the welfare of the student can combine their energies to improve the likelihood that programmatic objectives will be met (Yanok & Derubertis, 1989). Parents must be persuaded to become active participants rather than passive

observers of their children's education.

Collaboration between educators and parents is considered crucial for the improvement of educational services for students who have handicapping conditions (Edgar, Singer, Ritchie, & Heggelund, 1981). P.L. 94-142 and P.L. 99-457 both have provisions for involving parents in the educational process.

The family exerts the pivotal influence on the child's development and services directed to the child must work with and through the family to be effective (Krauss, 1990). To have a impact on special education outcomes, parent involvement must include participation in the planning as well as the implementation phases of programs. Such home-school collaboration will increase the chances that the services that are offered will have a positive impact on severely emotionally disturbed students' school, home and community behaviors (Epstein, 1987; Turnbull, 1983).

Setting the Stage for a Partnership

Parents' willingness to be involved in the education of their severely emotionally disturbed

children is directly related to their perception of the professionals' knowledge level, adequacy of communication skills and ability to provide that extra "personal touch" during their interactions. Personal contact is the best means of promoting parent partnerships (Edgar, Singer, Ritchie, Heggelund, 1981; Lindle, 1989).

During parent-teacher meetings, provide an environment that is conducive to parents and professionals feeling comfortable both physically and psychologically. DeBettencourt (1987) suggests the following to facilitate an active yet comfortable exchange of information between professionals and parents:

1. Hold the conference in a small room free of distractions.
2. Hold the conference on time and keep to the scheduled amount of time.
3. Set the chairs so the parents and the teacher are able to look comfortably at each other, with no desk between them.
4. Present all information clearly.

These recommendations will encourage the teacher to have an open dialogue with the parents and to be supportive of the their efforts to communicate specific concerns.

Since parents of severely emotionally disturbed children and adolescents experience excessive stress and frustration, providing a forum through which they can express how they feel about the situation and receive feedback will encourage an ongoing parent-teacher relationship. Parents want to know that they have been heard.

Active listening skills will facilitate the interaction between parents and professional and should be used during discussions with parents about mutual concerns in both academic and behavioral areas. Focus on being a good listener and hear what parents have to say from an open/nonjudgemental frame of reference. A combination of open questions, clarification and summarization, and reflection of feelings will establish a sense of respect between parents and teacher (Wittmer & Myrick, 1974) and lay the groundwork for an effective relationship.

The nature of the questions that you ask parents can influence their desire to continue the relationship. The following represent questions that most often have a negative impact on parent-teacher interaction:

1. the binding question (there is no real desire for an answer, the question usually includes the answer: "Nobody should come to school wearing dirty clothes, isn't that so?");
2. the soliciting agreement question (requires an answer but suggest that the parent must agree with the teacher: "You really didn't mean to send Alice to school without lunch money, did you?");
3. the forced choice question (limits the parents responses through an either-or approach: "Are you going to start taking more responsibility for Jimmy or are you going to leave it all up to us?");
4. the double bind question (the parent is judged through the question: "Have you stopped staying out all night?"); and
5. the why question (usually lack sensitivity:

"Why are you late?").

On the other hand, "open" questions will encourage the parents to develop their answers in whatever length, detail and direction they wish. Open questions promote a collaborative exploration of issues. The open question is broad. It invites the parents to answer the question from their own personal perspectives thus showing a respect for the parents. The open question can solicit a wide range of thoughts and feelings. The following are examples of open questions:

1. "How do you feel about Susan's test results?"
2. "What are your concerns about Billy's future?"
3. "What can you tell me about Sam's community involvement?"

During the communication process, parents must believe that what they have to say is important and that the teacher has listened to and heard them. Clarifying and summarizing the content of what the parents communicate will facilitate the interaction and keep the dialogue going. It will also confirm for the parents that they have been heard and that what they

have to say is important to the teacher. This confirmation will occur if the teacher rephrases or puts in her own words what the parents have said to her. Or, when a great deal of information has been shared, the teacher might summarize to make sure she has heard the essence of what the parents have attempted to communicate while at the same time helping to clarify for them the central theme in what might initially seem to be an overwhelming situation.

Clarifying and summarizing might start with one of the following statements:

1. "If I hear you correctly, you are telling me that...."
2. "You seem to be saying that...."
3. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but you're thinking...."
4. "In other words, you are trying to...."

With parents of severely emotionally disturbed students, the reflection or understanding of feelings response conveys that you are attuned to how they feel about the situation. It also shows a respect for the feelings that they are experiencing by not minimizing

or disregarding them, but rather acknowledging their presence. Starter statements might include:

1. "You're feeling angry about...."
2. "You're confused about how...."
3. "You really feel a sense of satisfaction when...."
4. "It's challenging to you, but you feel awkward just starting...."

When the teacher responds to the parents' feelings or attempts to clarify and summarize what they have said, the statement that is made may be rejected because it is not on target. But, it is important that the response be made because it says to the parents that the teacher is trying to understand their perspective. It shows a sense of respect for the parents by the teacher.

Using effective communication skills, the teacher might start the initial contact with the parents by focusing on the strengths of the student so that a positive tone is established. Encourage the parents to share information about the student's non-school interests and strengths. Information can also be

shared with the parents about the quality of class work, the amount, nature and completeness of homework assignments, test performance, and behavioral issues. A discussion of strategies that have been attempted at home and school and the perceived effectiveness of these techniques will create a forum for dialogue between parents and teachers from the beginning of the collaboration. In addition, a determination of the parents expectations for the student and the extent of their motivation to collaborate with educators to assist the student in meeting those expectations will prove to be valuable.

The information that is exchanged between parents and teachers must be held in strict confidence except where there is a need to consult another professional (DeBettencourt, 1987). Teachers should use their own judgement to determine if there is cause to believe that the parents are behaving in a way that is harmful to the student. When the teacher suspects that a problematic home situation exist, other professionals should be contacted.

Focusing on a Specific Issue

In terms of participation in the educational process, the areas in which parents of severely emotionally disturbed students are able to make significant contributions are: contact with teacher, participation in special education process, transportation, observation at school, educational activities at home, attending parent education/ consultation meetings, classroom volunteering, parent-parent contact and support, and involvement with administration (Cone, Delawyer, & Wolfe, 1985). Teachers, however, often do not know the best way to engage parents in assuming an active role and a shared responsibility for the education of their severely emotionally disturbed children and parents may lack an understanding of techniques that would enable them to be effective partners with professionals (Edgar, Singer, Ritchie & Heggelund, 1981; Fuqua, Hegland & Karas, 1985).

Partnerships have the potential to significantly impact on the effectiveness of parenting skills (Cone, Delawyer, & Wolfe, 1985; Lillie, 1975; Schaefer, 1972).

With students who are exhibiting antisocial behavior, research indicates that parents might benefit from assistance in discipline techniques, monitoring, positive reinforcement, and problem solving (Ramsey, & Hill, 1988). In addition, the intense stress that parents of severely disturbed students experience can be mitigated by a supportive relationship with a professional (Noh, Dumas, Wolf & Fisman, 1989)

Home-school partnerships can greatly enhance students' school-related achievement and prosocial skills development (VanDevender, 1986). According to Kroth and Simpson (1977), parents are generally capable of enhancing the development of their child or adolescent under structured conditions. With severely emotionally disturbed students the effects of home interventions must be specifically programmed to facilitate generalization across settings and time in order to enhance the effectiveness of the parents' efforts (Simpson, Swenson & Thompson, 1980).

To realize the potential that results from a partnership between parents and professionals and to encourage home-school collaboration, educators can

determine on an individual basis the extent to which parents are willing and able to participate in academic and behavior strategies that enable them to assist their severely emotionally disturbed students in making progress toward IEP objectives. From an ecological perspective, awareness of parent and family needs is also crucial (Johnston & Zemitzsch, 1988). Professionals must be aware and responsive to unique home issues. It is ineffective to respond to problems in isolation from the settings in which they occur (Evans & Evans, 1987). Disturbed student often exhibit inappropriate behaviors in more than one environment. Thus, matters related to their academic and behavioral needs must be dealt with in both the home and school environments by both parents and teachers (Simpson, 1988).

Professionals can work with parents to identify specific strategies that can be implemented at home and school to bring about desired student change. As parents become active participants with education professionals, parent-teacher communications will improve, along with the quality of student in-class

work, homework, test scores, and social interactions.

Parents and teachers of severely emotionally disturbed students often find themselves flooded with problematic issues of mutual concern. Yet, caution needs to be exercised when identifying those issues that will be the focus of the partnership. If collaborative efforts are initially targeted at overall change in the student's behavior and academics, parents and professionals will become overwhelmed. Focusing on a central issue will eliminate some of the frustration that occurs when attempts are made to change all of the undesirable student behaviors immediately and simultaneously.

Through a collaborative dialogue, a specific area might be targeted. This could include a behavior that calls for immediate action, study skills, test preparation skills, homework strategies, or some other agreed upon area where both parties are willing and able to assume a shared responsibility. Homework is a critical area that often causes increasing problems for severely emotionally disturbed students and subsequently their parents and teachers. A supportive

partnership can evolve around specific plans designed to better ensure that homework is done correctly and in a timely manner.

Role of Motivation

Motivation to initiate and maintain a parent-professional partnership must result from a shared sense of concern for the student and a belief that through collaboration student growth will be facilitated. Motivation is critical in an effective academic or behavioral program that involves parent-teacher partnerships. If parents are to become vital links in promoting desirable work habits and behaviors, the role of motivation in their continued involvement can not be underestimated. If collaboration is to be effective, strategies must be devised and implemented that encourage parents and teachers to support one another through an ongoing open dialogue. Maintain a "contact time" when it is best to call parents or to have them call the teacher. Make sure you are available during this time to respond to questions or concerns and to provide the necessary support and

encouragement. Sometimes, they just need someone to listen.

Concluding Comments

Through partnerships between parents and education professionals, an ongoing system of support can be provided for severely emotionally disturbed students to better enable them to have successful learning experiences. The time requirements for effective collaborative interaction may seem overwhelming at first, but as the students learn independent work skills and more appropriate behaviors, the need for direct parent and teacher involvement decreases significantly.

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